2010

Old Masters and Modern Muses: Red Grooms's Portraits of Artists, 1957-2009

Bryn Mawr College

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March 25–June 5, 2010

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE
Class of 1912 Rare Book Room, Canaday Library

Foreword and Acknowledgements Elliott Shore
Introduction Emily Croll
Interview with the Artist Michèle C. Cone
Film Essay Johanna Gosse

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Cover illustration: Red Grooms, *Nighthawks Revisited*, 1980, colored pencil on paper, 44 x 74 1/2 in., collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Foreword and Acknowledgements

"I have nostalgia; I have a sentimental love for the artists I portrayed.
Very early on, my involvement in art became my way of being in the world." Red Grooms, 2009

Nostalgia, sentimental love, my way of being in the world—nostalgia is a word that for historians can mean the antithesis of history, the thinning out of complication, the normalizing of experience, the yearning for a golden age that never really was. In getting to know Red, I have come to see that his idea of nostalgia is both simpler and richer than what one encounters in academia. As an historian, I discovered with Red a shared interest in the past, in the history of the places we inhabit and of the people who came before us. Red imagines himself in those worlds and can put himself in them through his art. He thinks of the past as continuous with the present; he understands the past as something that is alive and plastic, that has space for him in it, and that helps to shape him and us.

For Red, nostalgia is the capacity to explore the past from the point of view of the present, a way to show his love for those who came before, thus making it a space for him to be in the world, and, in turn, for us to join him in that space. It is a less encumbered way to think about nostalgia, stripped of the connotations of idealization, a golden age, melancholia, or of pining for home, which are some of the ways that nostalgia has been understood by historians. Red's understanding of this term is also more profound. He gets at memory in ways that the most recent findings in neuroscience confirm. We all remember—or recollect—the past for the purposes of the present, for our brains put the past into a shape that makes sense for us today. Red turns these recollections into a creative act, one that asks us to think again, to see again, to put ourselves into a deeper and more powerful place. He invites us into a space at once playful and thoughtful, meditative and speculative, that not only draws us a place to be, but makes room in the present for the past. He takes history seriously by crafting images of real people and events, seeing and caring for them anew. In so doing, he re-collects the past for understanding the present. A rare and lovely gift he shares with us all.

I want to thank Red and Lysiane Luoung Grooms for the opportunity to present these works to the Bryn Mawr College community and for their gift to the College of three works in the show: *Self Portrait with Litho Pencil*; *Five Futurists* print; and my favorite, *George Grosz in Berlin*. I want also to express my gratitude to Michèle C. Cone, class of 1951, for introducing Red and Lysiane to the College, for generating the idea of the exhibition, and for her interview with him in this catalogue. The Board of the Friends of the Bryn Mawr College Library, chaired by Teresa Wallace, class of 1979, has been a staunch supporter of this exhibition, especially Board member Margery Peterson Lee, class of 1951. A lovely gift to the College, in honor of María Dolores Dávila Rudolph, class of 1981, makes possible the mounting of this show in the Class of 1912 Rare Book Room. Emily Croll, Curator and Academic Liaison for Art and Artifacts, has done outstanding work in conceiving and curating this exhibition and provided a fine introduction in this volume. The excellent work of Johanna Gosse, a graduate student in the History of Art who served as curatorial assistant for the exhibition and authored the essay on Grooms's films, was funded by the Graduate Group in Archaeology, Classics, and History of Art. We also thank the following lenders to the exhibition: Red and Lysiane Grooms; Saskia Grooms; the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Shark's Ink; and the Marlborough Gallery. To Juliet Goodfriend, class of 1963, President of the Bryn Mawr Film Institute, we extend our warmest gratitude for her collaboration with us and to MM Serra, executive director of the Film-Makers' Cooperative, for making the films available.

Elliott Shore
Director of Libraries and Professor of History, Bryn Mawr College

Introduction

Bryn Mawr College's exhibition *Old Masters and Modern Muses: Red Grooms's Portraits of Artists, 1957-2009* is the first exploration of an important theme within the artist's oeuvre. As the esteemed art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto has noted, "A lot of Grooms's work is about art; he has an immense and an affectionate knowledge of art history, and he likes to use his art to make statements about its history and his own relationship to it."[1] This exhibition brings together more than thirty of Grooms's portraits of artists. In these works Grooms pays homage to artists ranging from Titian to Pollock, interpreting their physical features and their artwork through mimesis and humor, while also exploring how these artists have served as masters and muses for his own creative development.

Red Grooms has earned an international reputation for his large-scale sculptural installations, many of which depict both gritty and humorous aspects of urban life. For the tricentennial of Philadelphia in 1982, Grooms created *Philadelphia Cornucopia* at the invitation of the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. This 50' by 50' multi-scene installation paid humorous homage to founding fathers William Penn and Benjamin Franklin and also recognized two artists whose work is intimately linked with the city—Charles Willson Peale and Thomas Eakins. Four years after the first presentation of *Philadelphia Cornucopia* (the work was later installed in the Philadelphia Civic Center and 30th Street Station), Grooms's art reappeared in the city in 1985 in a major retrospective exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. This exhibition traveled to museums across the country and, in a slightly altered form, was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

A subject that has continually engaged Grooms throughout the course of his long and vibrant career is the image and persona of the artist. The selection of works for Bryn Mawr's exhibition includes artist portraits from each of the five decades of Grooms's career, beginning with the 1957 drawing and linocut print, *Five Futurists*, which Grooms has acknowledged as marking "the beginning of my infatuation with the likeness and work of other artists."[2] During subsequent years, as Grooms continued to examine the images and work of other artists, his explorations ranged from artists of the nineteenth century, whom he depicted in a series of prints in 1976, to twentieth-century masters, including the abstract expressionists, whose portraits he created in the 1980s and 1990s. During the past two years, Grooms has looked to the European artists of the Weimar Republic and the Dada movement.

Bryn Mawr's exhibition, presented in the Class of 1912 Rare Book Room in Canaday Library, spans Grooms's career and showcases the diverse media with which he creates, including a recent series of large scale pen and ink drawings and a broad range of prints—linoleum cuts, etchings, aquatints, drypoints, silkscreens, and lithographs. Although the limited gallery space precludes the presentation of Grooms's large sculptural installations, the exhibition includes a small sculptural portrait of the late filmmaker and photographer Rudy Burkhardt, with whom Grooms was close friends, as well as three of Groom's three-dimensional portrait prints—of Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Jackson Pollock. In these technically masterful print constructions, Grooms displays much of the playfulness and exuberance of his larger sculptural works. Printmaking, which has been a central component of Grooms's artistic production, allows him to display his virtuosity as a draftsman and colorist and provides a means by which he can reach a wide audience.

Grooms is fascinated not only with the image of the artist and his art, but also with the artist's milieu. This milieu sometimes serves as a venue for artistic creation, as in the *Cabaret Voltaire* in Zurich, which functioned in the 1910s as a nightclub, avant-garde art space, and political forum. Often the artistic milieu is more of a social sphere, crowded with the revelry of artists, as in the *Cedar Bar* in Greenwich Village and *Les Deux Magots* in Paris. Danto described Grooms's depictions of the *Cedar Bar*—the gathering place of the abstract expressionists in the 1950s—as "an act of piety and a confession of loyalty to the sources of his artistic being."[3] Regarding his group portrait of artists and intellectuals at *Les Deux Magots*, Grooms explained that the print "is a homage to the French culture that has shaped my view of art and philosophy."[4]

Sometimes Grooms's portraits of artists serve as vehicles for fantasy or surrogacy. In these instances, Grooms begins with the likeness of the artist and an understanding of the artist's work and historical period and then expands or overlays the subject with a narrative drawn from his own imagination or personal fantasies. As he acknowledged regarding his portfolio of *Nineteenth-Century Artists*, "I suppose I took the old line 'come up and see my etchings' literally . . . It was easy to imagine and also a lot of fun to put these famous nineteenth-century artists into risqué situations."[5]

Central to all of Grooms's art is humor. While humor is sometimes dismissed as a superficial subject for artistic endeavor and by definition as antithetical to serious, "high" art, it is also recognized as a vehicle for observation, critique, and even admiration. In writing about Grooms's humor, Danto has favorably identified Grooms as a clown, rather than a caricaturist. Danto makes the distinction that "The art of the clown differs from that of the caricaturist, in that the latter seizes on certain defects, and uses them in order to lower the subject through ridicule. The clown, by contrast, underlines the same imperfections as a way of raising the audience in its own esteem."[6] Certainly this is the case with most of Grooms's portraits of artists, as for example in *Jackson in Action*, where Grooms's portrayal of Pollock with five right arms provides a humorous commentary on the artist's working method, while in no way denigrating his creative force or iconic stature. In his portraits of artists Grooms does not mock his subjects, rather, he humorously reimagines them in order to share with his audience his admiration and affection for their artistic gifts.

The artists whom Grooms depicts are among the masters who have helped him develop his own artistic vision and style and the muses who continue to inspire and enrich his life and art. The diversity and range of these artists is a testament to Grooms's esteem and respect for the creative personality. As he proudly remarked in a 1967 interview for the Archives of American Art, "I think I have been influenced by practically every artist that I ever saw."[7]

Emily Croll
Curator/Academic Liaison for Art and Artifacts, Bryn Mawr College

[1] Arthur C. Danto, *The Wake of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1998): 145.

[2] Walter G. Knestrick, *Red Grooms: The Graphic Work* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001): 43.

[3] Danto, 145.

[4] Knestrick, 144.

[5] Ibid., 91.

[6] Danto, 141.

[7] Dorothy Seckler, "Oral History Interview with Red Rooms," 1967 September 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Red Grooms Replies to Questions from Michèle C. Cone, Class of 1951

Michèle C. Cone, class of 1951 and Friends of the Library Board member, prepared several questions for Red Grooms, which he and his wife Lysiane Luoung Grooms answered. Dr. Cone, an interdisciplinary scholar specializing in twentieth-century art, has been friends with the Groomses for many years. The following interview took place during the fall of 2009.

MICHÈLE C. CONE: Your forthcoming exhibition at Bryn Mawr College covers your trajectory from the late 1950s to now, and does so in a way that presents your life's work from a fresh vantage point: whereas you are famous for works in three dimensions, large installations in which you celebrate life as it is in busy chaotic Manhattan and other places, this show reveals that throughout your career you have often used art history for subject matter, and also worked small. It is your rarely seen two-dimensional works—drawings, etchings and aquatints, woodcuts and lithographs—that this show is about. Not only does it point to a new aspect of your talent, but it reveals that you have been preoccupied with specific art historical moments at different stages in your career. What inspired you to make use of and play with old art and portraits of dead artistic heroes?

RED GROOMS: I have nostalgia; I have a sentimental love for the artists I portrayed. Very early on, my involvement in art became my way of being in the world.

I—along with my own somewhat "lost generation" including Jay Milder, Bob Thompson, Peter Passantino, Marcia Marcus, and others—was fascinated by Old Masters. I pursued my self-propelled study of them through travels to and extended stays in Europe, visiting museums, and reading art books.

In 1960, for example, after reading *The Banquet Years* by Roger Shattuck, I was inspired to create my own banquet for Douanier Rousseau. His talent for writing art history like a historical novelist really turned me on.

In the piece *Mr. and Mrs. Rembrandt* from 1970, what interested me was the collage thing; a red velvet pillow reminded me of Rembrandt's hat, and Irish lace found in my grandmother's attic after her death provided me with the angle I was going to use to approach this work.

In *William Penn's Treaty with the Indians*, a work I did in the late 1960s, I interpreted Benjamin West's painting in a 1960s psychedelic version of it. At that time, fluorescent paints were trendy.

Le Banquet pour le Douanier Rousseau, 1963, mixed media construction, 32 x 81 x 16 in., private collection

Between now and the 1960s, I did many works on other artists; the artists being a kind of vehicle for me to channel my interest in collage-making. In *Portrait of Francis Bacon* from 1990, the key was the collage fun I was going to have at Bacon's expense, plus I had in my own studio the same mess he had in his. I used the remains I insisted on keeping around in my studio for no apparent reason—the lead paint tubes and the brushes, the palettes and jars and turpentine cans.

CONE: I have always believed that interest in a specific moment of the past speaks about what is going on in the present. Or put in another way, that it is not merely coincidence, but something new in the air that revives the memory of a certain event many years after the artistic event first occurred. So, let me be specific and ask you to talk about your most recent interest, *Otto Dix and his Milieu* and *George Grosz in Berlin*, two works which refer to the 1920s in Germany, and then *Cabaret Voltaire* and *Kurt Schwitters*, which refer to the Dada epoch during and after World War I. What could possibly have led you to those subjects in 2008?

GROOMS: I have long been interested in Otto Dix. In 1956 when I first came to New York, I went to the Museum of Modern Art and my favorite picture of his was *Dr. Mayer-Hermann* (1926) depicting a nose, ear, and throat doctor in his "whites." His stout body is rigidly seated in a chair and he stares out at the viewer, representing solidity, his important position in the German society as a doctor and his dominance over his patient. On his fat domed head sits a glistening disk that looks like a light. To me, the star of the painting is the disk.

In 2005, I saw *Glitter and Doom* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a show that astonishingly revealed a group of Dix's contemporaries who shared an interest in "clinical realism" that expressed the nature of the German population in the interim before World War II.

In the pen and ink drawing of *George Grosz in Berlin*, which I did in 2008, it occurs to me that the horizontal representation of George Grosz comfortably smoking a pipe shows the influence that Baselitz's upside down figures had on me. At first, I was baffled by his subjects being turned upside down, but now I can see how it expressively symbolizes the turmoil of Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, notably with the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group.

In the film noir shadows of Zurich, the Cabaret Voltaire sprung up with a lively mix of expatriates: writers, poets, critics, painters, sculptors, and puppeteers. They used their sense of absurdity as a means to express their revolt at the senseless slaughter of World War I. The theater that was created at Cabaret Voltaire was the prelude to *Car Crash* by Jim Dine or *Photo Death* by Oldenburg, *The Large Mouth* by Bob Whitman, *Eye Body* by Carolee Schneeman, and my *Burning Building*, the happenings that were cobbled together in 1959 to 1963.

CONE: It seems that in taking Dada's Cabaret Voltaire as your inspiration in 2008, you return to an interest from your early years, the 1950s, and to another group of ruckus makers, the Futurists. Can you talk about the two pieces in the show, a pen and ink drawing on cardboard from 1958, and a linocut on paper also from 1958 with five standing men, who might be either Russian or Italian Futurists, and tell us why you identified with the Futurists in the early days of your career?

GROOMS: In my late teens while I was living with my parents in Nashville, I came across the catalogue of an exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, *Italian Art in the 20th Century.* This was my introduction to the exciting works produced in Italy between 1900 and 1950. Many artists and movements were new to me, like the metaphysical school of Carlo Carrà, De Chirico, and Morandi and the sculptors, Manzù and Marini.

The ink drawing of the *Five Futurists* is done after a well-known photograph by Lucca Carrà, of Luigi Russolo, Carlo Carrà, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni, and Gino Severini. It is a study for the linocut. The drawing is in the right view from the photograph, the linocut is the reverse view.

In 1981, I did a piece called *Walking the Dogs.* It was inspired by Balla's futuristic dogs (humorously depicted long-haired dogs with their eight multiplied legs in fast movement). They, iconically and almost cartoonishly, embodied the purpose of showing the effect of motion, particularly as it was applied to modern life.

CONE: In the 1970s, you produced a lot of work about nineteenth-century French artists and poets, and in 1976 about Matisse and Picasso. Why the 1970s and why French artists?

GROOMS: In the aftermath of *Ruckus Manhattan*, exhausted and penniless, alone in the empty shell of my studio, I had before me a beautiful old lithography stone with a pristine untouched surface. I took for my inspiration a well-known photograph by the great Hungarian Brassaï of an aged Matisse, with a long coat and a distinguished white beard, seated in front of a nude model. After the intense labor of *Ruckus Manhattan,* I envied Matisse's calm, bourgeois-like studio life and daydreamed about myself living such a life; with a litho pencil and crayon I appropriated Brassaï's image.

In 1973, Picasso died and I was on jury duty, with free time on my hands sitting in the courtroom. I thought of the fullness of Picasso's life and the marvelous people who touched him. When I was released from my jury duty chores, I rushed to my studio and pinned on the wall a 15' by 15' square of orange paper and began to sketch in charcoal Picasso going to Heaven on a swing, surrounded by his artistic milieu; as I did this drawing, I also had in mind the last scene in John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* movie (with Technicolor photography by Eliot Elisofan) in which a parade of Toulouse-Lautrec's friends performed for him their last farewells.

In the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, I took the liberty to imagine the sex lives of my favorite nineteenth-century French artists.

CONE: In the same vein, I found it interesting that you returned to your old haunts of the 1950s in the 1980s with works evoking the Cedar Bar, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock. What prompted this nostalgic turn?

GROOMS: Along with my friends Bob Thompson and Jay Milder I was a junior part of the Cedar Bar scene from 1957 through 1960 and for twenty-six years I harbored in my mind the desire to make an artwork about the experience. When Lisa Phillips, then curator at the Whitney Museum, approached me in 1986 to create an environment for the Lobby Gallery of the museum it gave me the opportunity to realize a work on the bigger subject I had in my head. The full-scale environment was not realized, but the three-dimensional model for it is on view at Princeton, on loan from the collection of Peter Lewis.

CONE: One of the most mysterious portraits in the show is that of Marcel Duchamp with Katherine Dreier and the work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (Large Glass)* in her country house, which you did in 1984. Can you say a few words about that piece?

Red Grooms in his studio with (from left to right) Johanna Gosse, Michèle Cone, and Kim Schmidt, director of Marlborough Gallery

GROOMS: This is a pure piece of appropriation and again an example of my interest in collage. Looking at a photograph by John D. Schiff of Katherine Dreier's library at her home (The Haven) with Duchamp's *Large Glass,* I had the chance to make my own copy of Duchamp's *Large Glass,* out of aluminum strips, Plexiglas, and acrylic paint.

CONE: Throughout your career, you have made several self-portraits. I have always been intrigued by the circumstances that prompt an artist into making his likeness. What, if anything special, caused you to make a self-portrait?

GROOMS: I did my first self-portrait in 1955 when I was eighteen years old. I recall that I was in my own room at my parents' house in front of an Edwardian mirrored piece of furniture that belonged to my grandmother. It was a private act of examination to see who I was, leaving childhood and becoming a young adult. As a visual artist that is what you do, looking in a mirror. It is extremely romantic and probably an act of self-aggrandizement. At different stages of my life, I performed the same test to see where I was and continue to do so.

CONE: Red, I thank you so much for indulging my curiosity and interest in your work.

Catalogue of the Exhibition

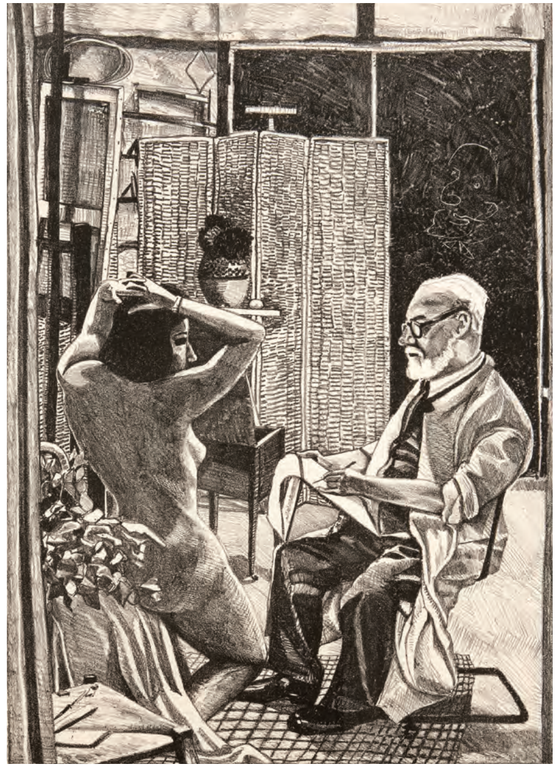
Self-Portrait, 1957
Pen and ink with wash on paper
11 1/2 x 8 13/16 in.
Collection of Saskia Grooms

Five Futurists, 1958
Pen and ink on cardboard
8 1/2 x 11 in.
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Five Futurists, 1958
Linocut on paper
6 1/2 x 7 3/4 in.
Edition of 10; publisher and printer the artist
Bryn Mawr College Collection, gift of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Mary Frank from the *Italy Sketchbook*, 1961
Pen and ink on paper
14 x 21 in.
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Rudy and Lupa, 1964
Acrylic on wood
16 x 14 1/2 x 4 in.
Collection of Saskia Grooms



Matisse, 1976

Lithograph

34 1/2 x 25 1/2 in.

Edition of 75; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Paul Narkiewicz, New York

Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York

Cézanne from the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, 1976

Etching and aquatint

11 x 14 1/2 in.

Edition of 40; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

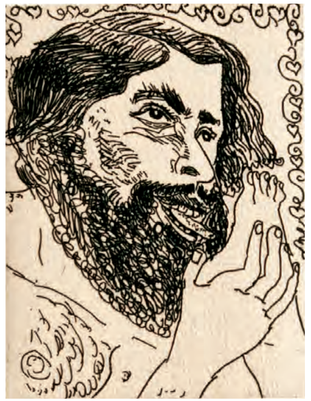
Degas from the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, 1976

Etching and aquatint

11 x 14 1/2 in.

Edition of 40; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist



Courbet from the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, 1976

Etching and aquatint

14 1/2 x 11 in.

Edition of 40; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Delacroix from the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, 1976

Etching and aquatint

14 1/2 x 11 in.

Edition of 40; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Rodin from the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, 1976

Etching and aquatint

14 1/2 x 11 in.

Edition of 40; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Whistler from the *Nineteenth-Century Artists* portfolio, 1976

Etching and aquatint

14 1/2 x 11 in.

Edition of 40; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Picasso Goes to Heaven II, 1976

Etching and pochoir

29 1/2 x 30 1/2 in.

Edition of 53; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Dalí Salad, 1980

Three-dimensional lithograph and silkscreen on paper and vinyl under a Plexiglas dome

26 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 12 1/2 in.

Edition of 55; publishers Brooke Alexander, Inc. and Marlborough Graphics, New York; printer Steven M. Andersen, Vermillion Editions, Ltd., Minneapolis, Minnesota

Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York

Nighthawks Revisited, 1980

Colored pencil on paper

44 x 74 1/2 in.

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Franz Kline, 1983
Gouache on carved telephone book
11 x 9 1/2 x 3 3/8 in.
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Les Deux Magots, 1985
Etching and aquatint
26 1/4 x 31 3/8 in.
Edition of 50; publisher Marlborough Graphics, New York;
printer Aldo Crommelynck, Paris
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York

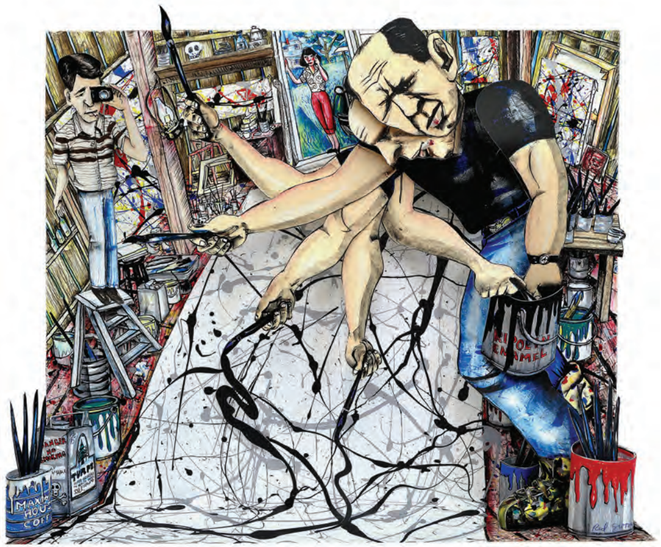
The Cedar Bar, 1987
Offset lithograph on film, Mylar, and paper
24 1/2 x 32 in.
Edition of 200; publisher Marlborough Graphics, New York; printers Maurice Sanchez, J. Petrocelli; Derriere L'Etoile Studios, New York
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York

Self-Portrait with Lysiane and Homer Green Sculpture, 1996

Watercolor with china marker on paper

24 x 18 in.

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist



Jackson in Action, 1997

Three-dimensional lithograph in Plexiglas case

26 x 33 x 7 1/4 in.

Edition of 75; publishers the artist and Shark's Ink.; printer Bud Shark, Shark's Ink.

Courtesy of Shark's Ink., Lyons, Colorado

Katherine, Marcel, and the Bride, 1998

Three-dimensional silkscreens on plywood, Lexan, cast polyester resin, steel, and copper

44 x 35 1/2 x 5 1/4 in.

Edition of 48; publisher AKASHA Studio; printer Steven M. Andersen, AKASHA Studio, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Self-Portrait with Litho Pencil, 1999
Woodcut on Japanese paper
30 1/4 x 20 1/4 in.
Edition of 10; publisher the artist; printer Tom Burkhardt, New York
Collection of Bryn Mawr College, gift of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Sonia, Darling! 2007
Oil on canvas
14 x 12 in.
Courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, New York

Cabaret Voltaire, 2008
Pen and ink with watercolor paper
26 1/4 x 41 in.
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

George Grosz in Berlin, 2008

Pen and ink on paper

21 x 30 1/2 in.

Bryn Mawr College Collection, gift of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist in honor of Elliott Shore

Otto Dix and his Milieu, 2008

Pen and ink on gold paper

30 1/2 x 22 1/2 in.

Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

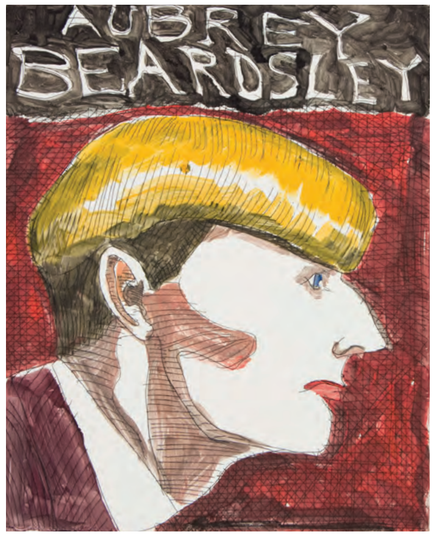
Self-Portrait with Barnum, Edison, Twain, and Rice, 2008

Ink and white correction fluid on paper

30 3/16 x 22 5/8 in.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Alberto Giacometti, 2009
Etching with aquatint
11 x 9 in.
Edition of 20; publisher Diane Villani Editions, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist



Aubrey Beardsley, 2009
Etching with spitbite aquatint and monoprinting
10 x 8 in.
Edition of 20; publisher Diane Villani Editions, New York; printer Jennifer Melby, New York
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven and Belle Haleine, 2009
Pen and ink and watercolor with collage on paper
30 x 22 in.
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Goya's Demons, 2009
Etching with spitbite aquatint
11 x 9 in.
Edition of 20; publisher Diane Villani Editions, New York;
printer Jennifer Melby, New York
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Rembrandt and Saskia, 2009
Etching with spitbite aquatint
9 1/2 x 8 in.
Edition of 20; publisher Diane Villani Editions, New York;
printer Jennifer Melby, New York
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

After Titian, 2009
Pen and ink on paper
18 x 24 in.
Collection of Lysiane Luoung Grooms and the artist

Celluloid Circus: Three "Ruckus" Films by Red Grooms

Throughout a career spanning five decades, Red Grooms has worked in nearly every established artistic medium, including painting, drawing, print, and sculpture, and has even contributed to the establishment of new ones, as a practitioner of the now-legendary happenings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the creator of innovative three-dimensional environmental installations or "sculpto-pictoramas," like *Ruckus Manhattan* (1975) and *Philadelphia Cornucopia* (1982). Less well-known are the short experimental films that Grooms produced, directed, and starred in, three of which—*Shoot the Moon* (1962), *Fat Feet* (1966), and *Tappy Toes* (1968–70)—are being screened at the Bryn Mawr Film Institute in conjunction with Bryn Mawr College's exhibition.[1] The making of these early films was a highly collaborative effort, during which Grooms worked closely with an array of friends, family, and associates.[2] Even so, the films exhibit a uniquely "Groomsian" style and sensibility, particularly through their combination of absurd humor and sincere homage to cinematic masterpieces of the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1962, Grooms collaborated with his close friend, the photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt, on a 16mm film called *Shoot the Moon*, a humorous tribute to the turn of century filmmaker Georges Méliès and his classic 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la lune*. Like Méliès's film, *Shoot the Moon* is silent, shot in black-and-white, alternates between live-action and animation, and utilizes basic camera tricks to create an aura of magic and whimsy. Yet, when compared to Méliès's elaborately designed and executed cinematic spectacle, *Shoot the Moon*'s intentionally makeshift, handmade aesthetic marks it, in the words of one writer, as "spectacle on a shoestring."[3] Moreover, while Méliès's *fin de siècle* film was based on the science fiction stories of H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, space flight had actually become a reality by the early 1960s. In fact, *Shoot the Moon* was shot in the same year that John Glenn became the first American to orbit the moon, a landmark event that dominated newspaper headlines during filming. Grooms himself recalls how the real-life sensation of Glenn's voyage was literally inscribed into *Shoot the Moon*'s elaborate *papier-mâché* sets, which were crafted from the same newspapers that were hailing Glenn's achievement. In this sense, Grooms's directorial debut coincided with this major historic milestone of the 1960s, even while he aimed, however sentimentally, to re-capture the utopian aspirations of cinema's earliest practitioners.

The plot of *Shoot the Moon* loosely follows that of Méliès's original film. In Grooms's version, a team of bumbling astronomers voyages to the moon in a makeshift rocket, whereupon they are captured by a bizarre race of moon creatures, the "moononauts." In the film's climax, Grooms makes his debut as the moon wizard, a spindly-fingered, *Nosferatu*-like villain encumbered by enormous plaster feet (a sight-gag that returns as the comic theme of Grooms's next film, *Fat Feet*). The captured earthlings offer the wizard and his moon-minions an oversized cigar, which subsequently explodes and emits vast clouds of smoke (a bit of slapstick that Grooms borrowed from Bob Hope's 1948 film *The Paleface*). Taking the opportunity to escape from these literal "lunatics," the astronomers pile into their rocket and blast off back to Earth. In the final scene, the astronomers are given a hero's welcome by a raucous crowd and the city's pompous mayor, played by the dance critic Edwin Denby.

The cast of *Shoot the Moon* were all non-professional actors drawn from Grooms's wide circle of friends, such as Denby and the artists Alex Katz, Patty Oldenburg, and Yvonne Jacquette (who also produced the costumes). Scenes were shot at various indoor and outdoor locations in and around New York City—including a loft on West 26th Street, an old storefront in Hoboken, NJ, and a squash court in Livingston, NJ. Every aspect of the film was handmade from improvised, store-bought materials—from the dramatically stylized, *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*-esque *papier-mâché* sets and cutout paper animation, to the actors' clownish Victorian-era costumes, white pancake make-up, and steel wool beards. Together, these elements lend the film its primitive, almost antiquarian appeal, while they also point to Grooms's intentionally amateurish approach to filmmaking, in which the "seams" are laid bare, making visible the fundamental artifice of the cinema for all to witness and delight in.

The chaotic, crowded cityscape in the final scenes of *Shoot the Moon* provided the setting and subject for Grooms's next major cinematic effort, *Fat Feet* of 1966. For this production, Grooms and Gross teamed up with friends Dominic Falcone and Yvonne Anderson, fellow artists who owned an animation studio in Lexington, MA. Whereas *Shoot the Moon* is an affectionate send-up of a classic sci-fi fantasy film, *Fat Feet* is a Groomsian reinterpretation of the "city symphony," an early film genre that includes Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), and, perhaps most relevant to the Manhattanite Grooms, Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's 1921 masterpiece *Manhatta*. But while these 1920s films use montage of documentary footage to capture the essence of the bustling metropolis, *Fat Feet*'s *mise-en-scène* is a purely fictive urban environment, manually constructed on a claustrophobic indoor set and populated by caricatured "types" instead of unique individuals.

Grooms with Archie Peltier filming *Mesdames, Messieurs: L'Exposition Universelle*, ca. 1980.

In a series of short comic vignettes, the camera witnesses cops and crooks, bums and bag ladies, nosy neighbors and grouchy shop owners, many of whom sport the eponymous fat feet, clownish cardboard appendages that convert everyday movement into comic slapstick. When an apartment building catches fire, trapping its helpless inhabitants within, the black-and-white film suddenly explodes into brilliant color and the setting transfers from the cramped interior set to the exterior of a real-life red brick firehouse, from which emerges a clumsy team of firefighters carrying

a brightly painted red cardboard fire truck. The highlight of this scene is its brilliant combination of live action and stop-action animation, in which the flames (again, painted cardboard flats) seem to lap at the sides of the building while the firefighters attempt to extinguish the blaze.[4]

Like *Fat Feet*, Grooms's next film *Tappy Toes* (1968–70) further exemplifies his theatrical impulse and his fascination with urban landscapes, but in this case, by way of an entirely different cinematic genre, the glamorous Busby Berkeley-style backstage musical of the 1930s. *Tappy Toes* starts out with a familiar backstage scenario—the young star crying in her dressing room—but gives it a distinctly Groomsian twist: she is suffering from a terrible case of gout, which has rendered her "tappy toes" grotesquely swollen. Likewise, the show's male star (played in hilarious slapstick style by Grooms himself) is falling-down drunk and unable to perform. Since the show must go on, the disgruntled director decides to replace the unfit stars with two untried amateurs, who, of course, know the entire routine by heart.

Unlike Grooms's previous films, the whole of *Tappy Toes*'s extensive song-and-dance routine is shot in vibrant color and features glittering sequined costumes and kaleidoscopic camera effects, resulting in a confectionery spectacle for the eyes. Nevertheless, this charming performance is actually secondary to the real star of the show, Grooms's *City of Chicago* installation, which initially serves as the setting for the dance but soon takes center stage. This intricately detailed sculpto-pictorama depicts famous Chicago personalities like Mayor Daley, Hugh Hefner, and Al Capone and memorable historical events like the 1893 World's Fair and the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Throughout the film, Grooms exploits simple camera techniques like split screening and double exposure to allow the dancers to magically enter this constructed cityscape, combining their live-action performance with stop-action animated sequences. In Grooms's films, artifice and reality co-mingle in a spirit of playful possibility. Although it is nearly fifty years since he made *Shoot the Moon*, the humor and sincerity of his 1960s films are what sustain their appeal to contemporary audiences, who are typically confronted with mass media spectacle, big budget special effects, and most of all, the buffer of cynicism that accompanies today's visual culture. Grooms's films are thus a refreshing reminder of the power of "making do" with limited means and a surplus of imagination. Both clown and ringmaster, Grooms invites his audience to step right up and enjoy the show.

Johanna Gosse
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[1] I am grateful to Bryn Mawr College's Graduate Group in Archaeology, Classics, and History of Art for providing the NEH Curatorial Fellowship that has allowed me to work on this exhibition and pursue research into Grooms's filmmaking. I would also like to thank the Film-Makers' Cooperative and particularly Executive Director MM Serra for her enthusiastic assistance.

[2] Grooms's films from the 1960s were "Ruckus Studios" productions, created in collaboration with his wife at the time, artist Mimi Gross, who helped create the films' painted *papier-mâché* sets and performed such characters as the bag lady sorceress in the opening sequence of *Fat Feet*.

[3] Janet K. Cutler, "The Films of Red Grooms: The Home Production as Spectacle," in *Red Grooms: A Retrospective, 1956-1984* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1985): 20.

[4] *Fat Feet*'s fire scene is evidence of the continuity between Grooms's filmmaking practice and his "Happenings," specifically his 1960 performance piece *The Burning Building*, a work that similarly centers on a dramatic fire. Furthermore, *Fat Feet* provides a link between Grooms's early Happenings and his large-scale environmental cityscapes of the 1970s, such as *Ruckus Manhattan*, a work that similarly takes on the character of the city as its main subject, rather than just its setting.

Photography Credits

Jacob Burckhardt p. 29

D. James Dee pp. 8 (top right, bottom right), 9 (top left), 11 (all), 12 (all), 20 (left), 21, 22, 23, 25 (left), 27

Rick Echelmeyer cover, pp. 8 (left), 9 (right), 15, 18 (left), 19

Cheryl Klimaszewski pp. 13, 16 (right), 24 (right)

Mia Moffett, Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts p. 16 (left)

Bill Orcutt pp. 10, 14, 17, 20 (right)

Orcutt & Van Der Putten, NYC pp. 24 (left), 26 (all)

Bud Shark p. 18 (right)

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution p. 23 (right)